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SUBJECT: Saudi Public Reaction to New TSA Initiatives

**¶1.** (SBU) SUMMARY: Saudi public and media reaction to the new TSA requirements has been overwhelmingly negative, with the tenor of commentary ranging from rhetorical assertions that the Kingdom is being punished for its "position against Israel" to practical concerns by workaday Saudis of the health effects of imaging technology, and whether Muslim women will be viewed naked by foreign technicians. Senior editors have also told PAS officers that the issue is being successfully exploited by conservative religious elements as an indication of U.S. perfidy vis-a-vis Saudi Arabia and Muslims.

**¶2.** (SBU) SUMMARY CONT: While we see evidence of the SAG pushing back through the Saudi media to minimize or contain the damage accruing to the new policy, our contacts suggest that local public opinion favors the conservative interpretation. We also note that the lack of detail in our press guidance-including our inability to publicly confirm whether Saudi Arabia is on the new TSA list and very basic information on the new explosive delivery system that has necessitated enhanced screening measures-hamstrings our media outreach and makes the embassy the source of last resort for information on the new policy. END SUMMARY.

**¶3.** The international media reports that passengers from Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and other "countries of interest" traveling to the U.S. on commercial air carriers elicited an avalanche of overwhelmingly negative reportage and commentary in Saudi Arabia, not least because the SAG was clearly caught flat-footed on the new policy. All local papers on January 7 quoted the Saudi Foreign Ministry spokesman as saying that the SAG is "seeking further explanation from Washington" on the new policy, thereby engendering (unpublished) commentary that the vaunted cooperation between Washington and Riyadh on counter-terrorism measures was only rhetorical in nature, and that Saudi Arabia, at the end of the day, remained an object of profound suspicion in the eyes of the U.S.  
//Rhetorical Outrage//

**¶4.** A sampling of some of the initial responses to wire service reports included that of an academic researcher who was quoted in liberal daily "Al Watan" (01/05) as saying that the inclusion of Saudi Arabia was "political blackmail resulting from the Kingdom's position against Israel... there is nothing new since the 9/11 attacks. Personal inspections, difficulties in obtaining visas, even after interviews that have included the elderly and disabled in wheelchairs--the list goes on." The same day the liberal Saudi website Al-Tomaar--often the counterpoint to conservative Islamist thinking on the internet--asserted that the SAG should impose reciprocal requirements on U.S. citizens coming into Saudi Arabia, while international Saudi-owned Arabic daily "Al-Hayat" January 6 that chairman of the Saudi Export Development Center Abdulrahman Al-Zamil as saying that any obstacles placed on Saudi passengers would affect the growing tourism and trade business between the two countries, and predicting that Saudi companies will not send their representatives to the USA "easily, which will result in the country obtaining products from other countries: an assertion widely repeated in other local media. "Arab News" editorialized on January 5 that "Muslims are once again being stigmatized and penalized because they are being associated with terror and terrorism. If the Nigerian Umar Farouk Abdulmuttab was a blue-eyed renegade belonging to a fringe Bible-belt sect, western reaction would have been

different."

//Looking on the Bright Side of a Slap//

¶15. (SBU) There have been a couple of somewhat positive reports in Al Watan and the Saudi Gazette, which PAS media contacts have said reflect the SAG's effort to minimize the public outrage and the pervasive sense among Saudis that the USG has shown scant respect to King Abdullah on this issue. Leading, pro-reform "Al Watan" on January 9 reported on its front-page that Saudi passengers landing the day before in Dallas experienced no unusual security checks or delays. The Saudi Gazette on January 5 carried an opinion piece by prominent female Saudi writer Sabria Jawhar (whose veiled visage regularly appears alongside her commentary in the paper) in which she asserts that the new requirements, while onerous and discriminatory in nature, do have the benefit of protecting the lives of people on board commercial aircraft. Jawhar goes on to blame the "idiots" of al-Qaeda as the cause of these and other affronts to Muslims worldwide. We expect more such pieces that seek to contextualize the new USG policy in the coming days, as the government and its allies try to counter negative portrayals of the U.S.-Saudi relationship by conservative religious groups in Saudi Arabia.

// Sinking In//

¶16. While the rhetorical outrage in response to the new TSA rules will continue, local concerns are beginning to focus on the practical implications of "enhanced screening." Public health concerns over the radiation emitted by body scan technology has appeared in "Al Watan", "Al Iktisaadia" and "Al Hayat," while religious injunctions against viewing of the naked human form have also been a feature of much public angst. On this latter point, conservative "Al Medina" commented on January 9 that "the U.S. administration is still trying, after the events of September 11, to launch immoral technology scanners that can reveal a very accurate scan of the human body. Passengers are automatically searched for the detection of explosives carried on the body or in the folds of their clothing. This is despite all reservations, ethical and health concerns, humiliation and shame."

//What We're Hearing//

¶17. Our contacts continue to reinforce the perspectives put forward by their media. At a retreat held outside Riyadh on January 8, female contacts of various ages and backgrounds told PD officers January 8 of their resentment of being "lumped together" with Yemen, Sudan, Pakistan and other states on the TSA list with whom they feel little affinity. A senior Saudi editor told PAO today that he was cancelling a scheduled trip to the U.S. in March, and was considering cancelling a speaking engagement at USC in April. Another told us that conservative elements in the country were seizing on the issue in an effort to build resentment against the U.S. Our local staff reports that their conversations with ordinary Saudis reveal genuine resentment over the new policy, and that heated local media commentary is affecting public attitudes over the new policy. All contacts report that the USG can expect "payback" from official Saudi quarters show the SAG's pique at the presentation and perceived lack of consultation on this policy.

¶18. Comment: International media reports, and not the USG, are driving the public discussion of the new TSA policy. We urgently need to be let off the leash and present a detailed case to the Saudi public that goes beyond the Washington guidance we currently have. Elements should include some characterization of the explosive device used on the Christmas Day airline attack (the nature of which has been widely reported in local and international media) and a public recognition that Saudi Arabia is indeed on the list. The opaque and hesitant nature of the current guidance makes the U.S. look unforthcoming, and is having a significant negative impact on our interests here. End Summary.

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